Notes

1 W.H. Auden, 'Anthem' (1945) in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York 1976), 257.

2 Etienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (Washington 1957), 28.

3 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne* (New York 1985), 47.

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Producing Happiness: Huxley and Dostoevsky on Love and Politics

I

IN HIS BOOK *Our Posthuman Future,* Francis Fukuyama contrasts the dystopian vision of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with that of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World.* Orwell's picture—of a vast, totalitarian empire in which its citizens' every word and deed are kept under constant surveillance by Big Brother, with misbehaviour met by punishment and torture—is one of 'classical tyranny', Fukuyama argues, 'technologically empowered but not so different from what we have seen and known in human history'.[1] More compelling for Fukuyama, after the fall of the Berlin Wall at least, is the 'more subtle and more challenging' vision put forth in *Brave New World*; here, he states, 'the evil is not so obvious because no-one is hurt; indeed, this is a world where everyone gets what they want'.[2]

Fukuyama is right insofar as, for Huxley's dystopia, citizens are not subdued by fear or force, but by the continual satiation of their State-conditioned desires through the supervised consumption of pleasurable goods and services. In the 'brave new world', the ingredients of human happiness have been precisely quantified so as

to be administered in all the correct doses to the general public on an industrial scale. Citizens are kept from overly intimate relationships that could provoke emotional angst, are conditioned from birth along Pavlovian lines to love and accept their station in society, and treat any negative feelings with the happiness drug *soma*. As one of the World Controllers explains towards the end of the book,

> The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They're well off; they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they're blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they're plagued with no mothers or fathers; they've got no wives, or children, or lovers to feel strongly about; they're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave. And if anything should go wrong, there's *soma*.[3]

If the tyranny of Orwell's all-seeing, all-knowing surveillance state is reasonably blatant, then, there is rather more ambivalence about Huxley's imagined society, which more closely resembles a totalitarian twist on liberal consumer capitalism. Yes, the inhabitants of this world have given up the poetry of the tragic and the pursuit of higher goods beyond merely material pleasure—indeed, have given up the liberty to *choose* to be unhappy—but they are infinitely comfortable and anguish-free. As Margaret Atwood has suggested, since as human beings we may be drawn to either side of this picture, to life as tragic and meaningful, or to life as guaranteed comfort and ease, 'Huxley's genius', she says, 'is to present us to ourselves in all our ambiguity'.[4] Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the novel is that this ambiguity extends even to the controlling elites. Towards the end of the book, we learn that they

have acted not out of an uncomplicated will to oppress, but from a wish to make people universally happy, even if this meant forfeiting beauty and truth. We discover that Mustapha Mond, the 'World Controller' for Western Europe, was himself once a scientist who sought to pursue truth for its own sake, but chose to renounce this in order to 'serve happiness. Other people's—not mine'; 'One can't have something for nothing', he remarks, 'Happiness has got to be paid for'.[5] Huxley indicates that it is this sacrificial impulse, rather than anything more straightforwardly sinister, which has produced the dystopian society of *Brave New World*.

II

Similar themes are in evidence in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*, a text that attacks the ideas of 1860s radical materialists such as Nikolay Chernyshevsky through the black-humoured ravings of the 'Underground Man'. Chernyshevsky and his ilk saw a utopian destiny for humanity in the enactment of the principles of 'rational egoism', and central to their benevolent vision was the notion that universal happiness could be attained through the establishment of a fully rational social order and the proper forms of education. For Dostoevsky's embittered protagonist, such 'systems elaborated by the lovers of mankind for the happiness of mankind' actually foresee a perverse future in which,

> all human actions will be calculated according to...laws, mathematically, like a table of logarithms, up to 108,000, and entered into a calendar...and all possible questions will vanish in an instant, essentially because they will have been given all possible answers.[6]

The Underground Man has no interest in such a deterministic picture: 'Who wants to want according to a little table?', he protests, 'Isn't there something that not only has not been but even cannot be fitted into any classification?'.[7] His contention is that in reducing human experience to abstract and calculable logics, the human person is rendered as little more than a cog in a machine or a 'sprig in an organ barrel'. Difference and freedom, in particular, dissolve, or appear chimerical. In his book on Dostoevsky, Rowan Williams has argued that the will to apply the 'systems elaborated by the lovers of mankind for the happiness of mankind' to the complexities of real human existence, as per Chernyshevsky, is a project that, in the end, can only appear as violent, and it is this which occasions the 'verbal counter-violence' of the Underground Man's polemical outbursts. Here, 'Reason, presented as the triumphant exercise of rationalising power, power to reshape and reduce the human experience, appears invasive'.[8] It is one of the deep paradoxes of modernity, Williams points out, that the well-intentioned attempt to overcome the irrationalities of human existence by rational, peaceful means merely reproduces violence in an inverted form: 'The amputation of unmanageable desires for the sake of peace becomes the quintessential form of 'modern' violence'.[9]

III

As we have seen, Huxley's *Brave New World*, in its portrayal of the extreme end result of such a project of social rationalisation for the sake of stability and happiness, conveys a similar sense. There too, despite the seeming peace and harmony of the future society, we see a ruthless flattening out of human experience. In distinctive ways, both authors highlight the violence implicit in modern attempts to

determine abstractly the parameters of human happiness and construct a social order on this basis, regardless of how benevolent the intentions. Indeed, for both, it is precisely these abstract good intentions that are part of the problem. It is therefore significant that, as a constructive counterpart to this critical perspective, both authors seem to gesture towards a more positive mode of love, grounded in particularity.

In a passage of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, for example, we find the Elder Zosima speaking to Madam Khokhlakov, who is struggling with a lack of faith, on these very themes. When the Madam confesses of her love for 'mankind', and her dream of giving everything up—including the care of her sick daughter Lise—to serve 'mankind', Zosima recounts the words of an anonymous doctor as follows:

> 'I love mankind', he said, 'But I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons. In my dreams', he said, 'I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with someone for two days...I become the enemy of people the moment they touch me...On the other hand, it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole'.[10]

Zosima goes on to expound the difference between this 'dreamed' love of humanity in general and an 'active' love of people in their particularity. Love in dreams, he avers, is 'quickly performed, and with everyone watching...looking on and praising...active love is labour and perseverance', 'a harsh and fearful thing' by comparison.[11]

The implication, on one hand, is that to love 'mankind' Madam Khokhlakov must continue with the task of loving Lise, her sick daughter, with all the patience and forbearance that may entail. On the other, it is that to pursue a dreamed love of 'mankind in general' is somehow to put at risk, or to distract from, active love in the particular. To love 'mankind in general' at no point necessitates the labour and perseverance required to love a specific person; perhaps it is, after all, the kind of thing that could be deferred to an impersonal, technically administered process.

It is interesting, in turn, that in Huxley's dystopia, close long-term relationships with specific others are deemed a grave threat to happiness and stability, and as such, mothers, fathers, spouses and lovers are all effectively abolished. 'The greatest care is taken to prevent you from loving anyone too much', says Mustapha Mond at one point.[12] By contrast, one of the only truly hopeful moments in the novel, wherein the theorised happiness of the Controllers is set off against something more substantial, occurs towards the end, when the Savage, Bernard and Helmholtz are seen through their shared trials to have formed a genuine bond. Here, Huxley writes, 'There was a silence. In spite of their sadness—because of it, even; for their sadness was the symptom of their love for one another—the three young men were happy'.[13] Thus, for Huxley too, abstract benevolence toward humanity in general, producing an artificial happiness, is set in relief against love as that which arises in and through particular affinities.

IV

We are here faced with a paradox: to love 'humanity' seems to mean attending to those who are nearest; if we are to arrive at the universal, it will be through local and specific bonds, as frivolous and

accidental as they may seem. To the question of political implications, Rowan Williams has explained how in Dostoevsky we learn that the necessary task is the 'conserving [of] life in small particulars, a commitment to human history not as a grand project but as the continuance of a vulnerable localized care'; this work of love in small particulars is nevertheless precisely what 'from the vantage point of the rationalist reformer, is going to be full of unnecessary things and casual griefs and joys'.[14] In other words, the effectiveness of such an ethic cannot be demonstrated through utilitarian calculation, just as the active love of labour and perseverance to which Zosima calls Madam Khokhlakov cannot be proven to be productive, and so requires the faith that she lacks. Before the rationalising power of scientific and technological modernity, a commitment to conserving life in small particulars can only appear as a kind of folly, in this sense, yet Dostoevsky and Huxley's reflections on love and happiness suggest that it may represent a higher wisdom.

Some say we live in post-ideological age beyond utopian political projects. Even so, contemporary politics has on all sides absorbed an economistic ideology that renders society and culture increasingly subject to calculative logics, with all goods seemingly measurable by number (ultimately by money), and the effectiveness of all actions determined by cost-benefit analysis. Even if happiness and wellbeing indexes are an improvement on GDP as more holistic indicators of 'progress', they can easily convey the idea that human joys are quantifiable and maybe even producible with the right arrangement of institutions and appropriate investment. The desire to reduce human existence to manageable *abstracta* remains, therefore, and remains utopian. Ways of living that eschew such instrumental patterns of thinking, refusing to separate means and ends, may indeed appear foolish, yet Dostoevsky and Huxley remind us that

those loves and joys that are of highest value escape and exceed these rationalisations anyway, by virtue of their very frivolousness and specificity. If, as for Christianity, human 'flourishing' has to do with cultivating forms of common life that might partake in these shared goods—ultimately the love of God—then this flourishing, and the happiness or joy that it brings, is not something that can be produced or guaranteed by any political process. It draws on a deeper gratuity.

Notes

1 Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York, 2002), 4-5.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London, 2007), 193-194.

4 Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction' to Huxley, *Brave New World*, xvi.

5 Ibid., 201.

6 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From the Underground*, tr. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London, 1993), 25.

7 Ibid., 22-26.

8 Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London, 2008), 19.

9 Ibid., 19.

10 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London, 1991), 57.

11 Ibid., 58.

12 Huxley, *Brave New World*, 209.

13 Ibid., 214.

14 Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 24.